

The Participation Forum^{*}

January 19, 1995

Topic: Participation When There is No Time

The most persistent refrain during a year's worth of Participation Forums is that participation takes time. And yet, what do we do in a situation where there simply isn't time? Results are needed yesterday. Perhaps the usual institutions in the country are not functioning. What do you do? Addressing these tough questions at the ninth Participation Forum was Rick Barton, Director of the Office of Transition Initiatives. Mark Schneider, Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean, introduced Rick and participated actively in the subsequent discussion.—Diane La Voy, Senior Policy Advisor for Participatory Development.

Engaging People Who Have a Stake in the Outcome: From El Salvador to Haiti

Mark Schneider

My view, going back to my Peace Corps experience in El Salvador, is that participation is an essential element of solving problems, and it doesn't matter whether you're dealing with a long-term development problem or a crisis. If you fail to engage people who have a stake in the outcome, you ultimately fail to understand the needs that are involved, you fail to understand the problems that are at issue, and usually you fail to find the right solution.

I've had an involvement with participation as part of crisis situations over the past 20 years in various Latin America countries. Three years ago, I was an observer-participant in the transition from war to peace in El Salvador; the UN was developing a national reconstruction plan in El Salvador and I was the World Health Organization's representative. The experience gave me two perspectives on how to proceed in Haiti. In general, the nongovernmental organizations and grassroots organizations in El Salvador that had been active in providing services and responding to the crisis in the years of conflict had not been consulted in any way in the negotiations to develop the plan. In one area, however, in issues regarding displaced persons and refugees, all groups involved had a chance to define the problems, their needs, and possible

The Participation Forum is a series of monthly noontime meetings for USAID personnel to explore how to put into practice the Administrator's mandate to "build opportunities for participation into the development processes in which we are involved" ("Statement of Principles on Participatory Development," November 16, 1993). Guest speakers from in and outside of USAID describe their experiences and enter into a general discussion of the theme of the session. A summary of the meeting is disseminated within USAID by E-mail, and readers are encouraged to engage in an E-mail dialogue. E-mail should be directed to Diane La Voy, using either the USAID directory or INTERNET, as DLAVOY@USAID.GOV. Printed copies of the Forum summaries will be distributed to participants and attendees from outside of USAID and others interested in participatory development.

solutions. In Haiti, as we attempted to define a response to the emergency in terms of longer-term development, I was determined to ensure participation from all who had a stake in Haiti's ultimate recovery.

The Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) provided a ready-made entity to help us grapple with the problem of ensuring participation in defining solutions to our problems. OTI represents Brian Atwood's views that crises must be dealt with not only on a short-term basis, but as a first step towards a future, longer-term development program—a sort of "preventive diplomacy." OTI fills a gap in a new way; it is not only helping us move through this period of transition but also ensuring that the next stage, recovery and reconstruction and development, is likely to be more successful.

OTI: Political Development Through Grassroots Initiatives

Rick Barton

Mission. When it was created, OTI was going to be turbocharged democracy. I'm not exactly sure that's what it has ended up being, but I think it's fair to say that OTI is the office that participation built. At the core of our mission is one fundamental truth about participation: if you're ever going to get to a system of the people, by the people, and for the people, then you'd better engage the people as early as you can.

Our job is to bring fast, direct political-development assistance to nations emerging from distress. We're supposed to operate in the period when systems have broken down, leadership is feeble, the economy is disrupted, there is violence and intimidation, and few freedoms. Our office is supposed to fill the gap until the larger-scale new justice systems, maybe formal elections, and other pieces of the governmental development take hold. It is a time when there is a real need to pay attention to the political development opportunities.

The "Gersony Approach." One of our key early influences was Bob Gersony, who told us about a project on the Atlantic Coast region of Nicaragua. The area had been overrun by two armies, and then a hurricane for good measure. People were hanging around wondering what to do with their lives. Bob went there for 60 days. He rented a boat, went up and down the rivers, and he met with anybody he could find who could talk about what was going on.

He came back with a straightforward conclusion that the people needed a certain kind of Colombian rice, a certain kind of machete, and roads to take the rice to the markets. He arranged to provide all these elements—got people back to rice farming and set up work crews to build the roads. The farming cut back on the people who were kibitzing or worse. The road crews, small teams that included the entire spectrum of the political combatants, became a practical mechanism for reconciliation.

One strong point was that the approach mixed theory with reality, that there was a little bit of money to go with the civil education, and the other pieces. Another was that it drew heavily on the field for wisdom on how to proceed. Problems were that there's only one Bob Gersony and he's not that available and that the approach takes too long. We knew we had to move faster, and we knew we had to move beyond just one guru.

Our next experience was in Sarajevo. The NATO truce was holding, things seemed to be getting better, and we thought that Sarajevo might be the building block that we could use to create a real program in Bosnia, a beginning toward reconciliation. After three days of official meetings, we really didn't know much more. But we got lucky. The mayor offered us a guide—one of the rare breed of literal people, who when we'd say, "Gee, why would anybody want to have a baby during this kind of situation?" would say, "We will go to the maternity ward." We'd say, "What is life like at the front line?" and she would set up a meeting at the front line. Or we'd say, "Tell us about some of the young people and what dreams they have," and she set up a group of young gymnasts. Through interviews and focus groups and community meetings, we suddenly got a good cross-section of what was going on in Sarajevo.

As a result, we concluded that there wasn't the political will to move on. What's more, the middle class, the lifeblood of the community, was being sucked out of the city. The only solution we saw was to stop the brain drain and even that had only about a 10 percent chance of working. Brian Atwood's conclusion was that our involvement there wouldn't have much chance of success. And subsequent events have confirmed this view.

From Intimidation to Local Empowerment in Haiti. Haiti became the next focus of our attention. We knew that the U.S. military intervention was taking care of security and that the USAID programs were feeding about a million people a day. We thought that success would depend on the military engagement being brief. To have a successful hand-off, you cannot have the military in a dominant role, so you must have a significant civilian presence all over the country. We began to think about a decentralized model. It would also have to be a real presence; after you've had 20,000 troops, you can't just have 15 USAID people. We also thought international aid would not be felt in the countryside for a long time, that most of it would be centered in Port-au-Prince even though 70 percent of the people live outside of the capital.

These were our assumptions, but we needed enlightenment from the field. So we built a core team here of people from all over USAID. In addition, our grantee, the International Organization of Migration (IOM), hired a half dozen people, now the nucleus of those permanently located all over Haiti. The two groups spent a couple of days in Port-au-Prince and then went out into the field for 12 critical days: the five days before Aristide arrived, the weekend that he returned to the country and five days after. They met with over 500 Haitians, including some 130 local elected officials who hadn't gotten together for several years, in virtually every conceivable setting. They got a pretty good assessment of how fragile security was, how huge the Haitians' pent-up demand was to take some control of the situation, and how everything is a priority in Haiti. This information refocused our efforts and formed the basis for the program that we have now.

We think there are three central political development issues in Haiti: restoring legitimate government, not just President Aristide, but at every level; moving from a system of intimidation to one of broad public participation; and decentralizing control and empowering people at the local level. Everything we are doing with our program goes through those filters. If we're not addressing one of those three things, then we shouldn't be doing it.

Our program mixes the product, which is political development, with the byproduct, which is a series of quick-start, quick-impact, micro-cost projects, so that the real needs of people in the community become the focus of the political organizing. Each project includes a straight, political development component, some kind of civic education.

We have 13 teams covering 16 areas of the country. Every area of the country now has two internationals. We've also already hired about 50 Haitians and plan on hiring a total of 150. We go beyond people who speak our language and have formal education and seek out natural community leaders. In a sense we're running an on-site, on-the-job political development institute, which we hope will be one of the sustainable pieces. These teams have the decision-making authority to spend up to \$5,000 on any project. Each project must be run by a citizen board or community group. Many are extragovernmental, anything from a voodoo event to more traditional groups. We've tried to reach to include more women, more young people, groups that have not historically been involved.

Examples of Projects. Participation is inherent in all the little initiatives we're undertaking because we're in a facilitating, rather than in a dominant, role. For example, a certain dam had a silt problem but the central government wasn't providing the money to pay the silt cleaners to make it operative—so the electricity was not getting to the people at the bottom of the hill. The people down the hill thought electricity should be free because God provides the water and why should you pay for the water that God provides. The silt cleaners who lived in the immediate area weren't getting any electricity either. It seemed to be an intractable situation. Our job was to figure out how to help the local people find a solution. The community came up with the idea that there should be some charge for the water rights from the dam and

that the silt removers could be paid from that fund. They now have created such a fund, run by a local board.

One of my favorite examples had to do with water distribution. In this case, the water company and the electric company were known as being inept and corrupt, with long histories of favoritism. The only people with reliable water and electricity were the local army barracks and a few selected houses. Eleven community leaders spontaneously got together with some reinforcement from our operation and from the multinational forces, to address the problems of water distribution and illegal taps. The upshot was that the group voted on whether to create a new distribution pattern. The local Haitian army representative and the local manager of the water district all voted against it. But those for the new system won. The new system is completely extragovernmental. And one of the ironies was that our team lost their water because, unbeknownst to them, the residence had an illegal tap.

In other cases, we have supported initiatives to make accounting systems more transparent so that people know where their dollar or their gourde is going. In one town, people were wondering why they didn't get lights more than 8 to 14 hours every second or third day. We helped them understand that the problem was that revenues collected for electricity would pay for only about 40 hours of light per month. People now understand that something will have to be done about collection of revenues, that people are going to have to start paying.

We also made reporting about toll revenues more transparent. This time it had to do with one of the three major highways in the country, which has so many potholes that you can only go about 5, 10 miles an hour. The toll is 5, 10, or 15 gourdes. Truck drivers, tap-tap drivers, and other people who use the road met to discuss the rates and how the money should be used. As a result, people now get a receipt when they pay their tolls, and the amounts collected are posted. Now, when the potholes get filled, people see that it's their gourdes at work. Again, it's a very basic system of local governance. But all politics is local, as you know.

In all these cases, we have helped to get these groups going. Sometimes, our local representative may even convene the first meeting, but thereafter, his/her role is just supportive, trying to find out what is needed. The groups are very much on their own. We are just providing a little bit of the juice to keep them functioning.

Early Results. It's too early to claim success, but I think participation has done a lot for us. First, it helps us refine our strategic plan right from the beginning because it involves real people rather than officialdom. Second, it adds to our confidence in our program, because it reflects what is happening on the ground. Third, it reduces the risk of paternalism, a worry for all of us. Fourth, it increases the likelihood of success because we're doing what's needed versus what we have projected. Next, it increases the long-term viability because people are involved in the solutions from the beginning. And most important, it creates the democratic foundation that sustains and will sustain long-term economic, political, and social development.

Whether people like our program or not, almost everybody likes the decentralization, the hands-on involvement, the flexibility, the ability to respond to what's there in the community rather than basing activities on a pre-designed plan. One of our competitive advantages should be that we are closer to the people than any other part of the U.S. foreign aid, foreign relations package. Sometimes we are, and in others, we know we could do better.

Discussion Section

Participatory Monitoring

Ann Sweetser: In working for sustainability, are you incorporating any participatory monitoring?

Mark Schneider: For monitoring the emergency jobs program, we ask the local NGOs that are managing the program whether what was proposed initially has succeeded. And the U.S. PVOs themselves bring together all the local NGOs that are carrying out the health services in the Comité de Santé, and they look at what is being done.

Rick Barton: In the OTI program we have a couple of ways we're keeping track of what's going on. For each of our projects, we have a simple front-and-back-page reporting form that asks how many Haitians and what other organizations are involved and what the political development component is. We also keep a straightforward count of how many people are going through our civic education programs. We have yet to decide how we'll review what has happened over the longer-term, but I expect we'll involve some of the Haitians whom we're working with. I think our success in doing that is going to be measured on whether we are, in fact, having an influence on people at the grassroots level.

Lasting Political Change

Derek Singer: President Aristide has said that it is the second democratic election that really defines whether a democratic transition is going to work. What is OTI doing to lay the basis for this second election in Haiti?

Rick Barton: A lot of our civic education, which is giving people an increased sense of ownership and helping to meet some of the rising expectations that surfaced with the return of Aristide, will help to stabilize the political environment. We will also serve as a platform to facilitate candidate forums and some of the LAC and Democracy Center initiatives. Our contacts all over the country should be helpful in the case of later justice or environmental initiatives.

Audience: In Eastern Europe, after the first flush of democracy, the second wave has returned many of the earlier government technocrats. Are you looking at that in terms of Haiti?

Mark Schneider: I cannot conceive of the Haitian people voting back into power, to take it to the extreme, the Tonton Macoute or the Mevs. On the other hand, it will be necessary to demonstrate movement. If over the next year, people don't believe they have more economic opportunity, more chance to express themselves and participate in the political process, then support for the overall democratic process could diminish.

Rick Barton: Aristide's refreshingly honest campaign promise—"from misery to poverty with dignity"—means that we are starting from a basis in reality. Still, the whole situation could easily unwind. One of Eastern Europe's problems, also true in Haiti, is the thin layer of people who can speak World Bank and speak USAID and speak whatever else. There is no farm system. Part of our goal at the local level is to create potential leaders.

OTI Role

Kathleen Campbell: Does OTI see any role for itself in areas where long-term insecurity is an issue, such as rebel-held areas?

Rick Barton: Brian Atwood said, after we came back from Sarajevo, that we should be a "post-bullet program." Still, we are in a couple of such places. In Angola, we're looking for an opening. We've helped fund the preparation of a demobilization plan through the UN and we're looking at the land mine situation. We're also in central Bosnia, looking at some of these quick-impact reconciliation projects between the Muslims and the Croats—not where the Serbs are, and where there is limited peace.

Hal Gray: Given the limitations in personnel in OTI, how do you institutionalize? Can some of the work be passed on to the LAC Bureau so that Rick's free to go on to other hot spots? Is the approach sufficiently proven to form the basis of a full-fledged project? Would it be the same or a little different, if the development people were running it?

Mark Schneider: In the case of Haiti, we're going to have a transition to the United Nations, with the UN, most likely, picking up the contract with IOM. Ultimately, the government of Haiti should take over financing the same kinds of activities. In addition, we've got two local government projects in which we could replicate the model that's been set up.

Haiti: Favorable Conditions

Mark Schneider: There are three circumstances that helped make the program in Haiti possible. One is that the three political development goals that Rick mentioned were also part of President Aristide's proposal, so our program meshed with what was being promoted from the new, restored democratic government. The second is that the DART team has been a fundamental link between the military, the incoming civilian government, and our ongoing A.I.D. program. So part of the needs for safety, food, and shelter were being dealt with. Third, prior to the return of President Aristide, we had been working through the NGO community, so that our program benefitted from a network of participation that was feeding information and concerns in, and emphasized the need for this kind of program.

Diane La Voy: I'd like to explore further the issue of notwithstanding authority. Rick, my understanding is that one of its most important uses, for you, was simply in being able to avoid a lengthy, competitive bidding process for your principal implementer.

Rick Barton: That's right, but there is another even more valuable factor that has helped us: having someone, Doug Stafford (AA/Bureau for Humanitarian Response) in particular, who says at the end of every day, "Are you making a difference?" It's the mind-set that says "Hey, go ahead. You're the venture capital of this business...get out there and do things....." We don't have to waste all our time checking and providing reports.

Participation and Public Opinion

Danielle Roziwski: Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot has said, "It's not a question of what's good for Russia, but whether Russia continues to develop in the manner that's good for American interests and values." What ramifications do you see the current political climate and rhetoric having for USAID's ability to continue to facilitate and encourage participation?

Rick Barton: We need to be more assertive about the value of USAID and foreign assistance. We need to make the larger case that it is a good preventive expenditure; it helps produce a more stable world. Our success is going to be measured based on whether we are having an influence on people at the grassroots level. Power to the people seems to be a concept that everybody in the political spectrum—both liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans—holds as their own. This program gets away from our tendency to be overly bureaucratic. It gives us the satisfaction of knowing that we have made something happen.

Mark Schneider: Our assumption is that participation is an essential element in helping to bring about successful change and development. Ultimately, that is in the United States' national interest. If it fails, then we will have to face other kinds of crises, use other resources and it will be both more expensive and contrary to our goals for the international community.

Rick Barton: Haiti is a good example of this principle. It's probably the most popular U.S. intervention since World War II. The soldiers have virtually been carried around on the shoulders of the Haitian people. If you're going to have anything sustainable, the vast majority of the public has to believe in what's happening. So it's a good measure for our involvement.

Communications from the E-mail Bag

Dayton Maxwell: "I attended the January session, and had two questions I wanted to ask but waited too long.

"The first is how do we respond when A.I.D. is OBLIGED to participate in managing U.S. resources in complex emergencies, rather than when we pick and choose? Rick Barton said that (based on OTI's participatory survey in Sarajevo) the Administrator concluded that their work there would be 'wrong time, wrong place'—little chance of success. On the other hand, the State Department has mandated A.I.D. to manage \$10 million for Sarajevo rehabilitation and \$20 million for 'strengthening the federation' in Central Bosnia.

"My second question is to what extent can we detect the potential for political instability to deteriorate into conflict? And can we assess requirements for mitigating actions? This might be the most fertile field for exploration. It is part of the U.S. foreign policy of preventive diplomacy. This question might be worth devoting a session to."

Robert Herman: "I had to leave a few minutes early, but had I been able to stay I would have asked about the difficulties of OTI's playing a facilitating role in polarized political/ethnic environments or where there is virtually no experience of a participatory culture at any level. I would also have liked to ask about prospective trade-offs of identifying and working with indigenous, traditional authority structures, which may themselves be non-participatory/non-representative/hierarchically organized. I'm thinking, for example, of instances where women have been denied much of a role in political life."